My thoughts and reactions to what I am reading.

An Ordinary Woman
by Bette Green

I dial the number that for more than twenty years has been committed to memory and then begin counting the rings. One... two. three... four... five... six—Christ! What's wrong with—

"Newton North High School, good morning."

"Jeannette? Oh, good morning. This is Amanda Brooks. Look. I may be a few minutes late today. Something came up—no, dear. I'm fine, thanks for asking. It's just a... a family matter that I must take care of. I shouldn't be more than ten to twenty minutes late for my first class, and I was wondering if you'd kindly ask one of my students, Dani Nikas to start reading to the class from where we left off in The Chocolate War? ... Oh, that would help a lot... Thanks. Jeannette, thanks a lot"

Aimlessly I wander from bookcase to armchair to table and finally to the large French window that looks out upon my street. Like yesterday and so many yesterdays before, my neighbor's paneled station wagon is parked in the exact spot halfway up their blue asphalt driveway. And today, like yesterday, Roderick Street continues to be shaded by a combination of mature oaks and young Japanese maples.

How can everything look the same when nothing really feels the same? Good Lord. Mandy Brooks, how old are you going to have to be before you finally get it into your head that the world takes no interest in your losses?

The grandfather clock in the hall begins chiming out the hour of seven and suddenly fear gnaws at my stomach. What am I afraid of now?" For one thing, all those minutes. At least thirty of them that I'll have to face alone, here, with just my thoughts.

Calm down now! It's only thirty minutes. Why, the last thing the locksmith said last night was that he'd be here first thing this morning. “Between seven thirty and eight for sure!”

Anyway, nobody can make me think when I still have the kitchen counter to wipe and breakfast dishes to put into the dishwasher. Thinking hasn't come this hard since Steve's death on the eve of our eighteenth anniversary. That was major league pain all right, but so dear God is this. So is this....

No time for that now—no time! Tidying up the kitchen is the
only thing that I want to think about. But upon entering the kitchen, I see that with the exception of a mug still half full of undrunk coffee, there is really nothing to do. I pour the now cold coffee into the sink before examining the mug with all those miniature red hearts revolving around the single word MOM.

It was a gift from Caren and not all that long ago either. Maybe a year, but certainly no more than a year ago. But even then I had had suspicions that something wasn't right. Maybe without Caren's loving gift coming at me out of the blue, I would have followed my instincts and checked things out. But frankly I doubt that. The thing is that I wanted—needed—to believe in my daughter.

And going through her drawers in search of i-knew-not-what offended me. It goes against my sense that everybody, even a seventeen-year-old, deserves privacy.

You make me sick. Mandy Brooks, you really do! Just when did you get to be such a defender of the constitutional rights of minors? Why don't you at least have the courage to come on out and tell the truth. Say that, at all costs, you had to protect yourself from the truth. The terrible truth that your daughter, your lovely daughter is a junkie!

Stop it! Stop it! I'm not listening to you anymore! And there's nothing you can do to make me! Steve... Steve, oh my God, Steve, how I need you! There hasn't been a day, or even an hour, in all these twenty-two months since you left Caren and me that I haven't needed you. Don't believe those people who observe me from safe distances before patting my wrists and commenting on how strong I am. “How wonderfully you're carrying on alone.”

Maybe I walk pretty much the same and talk pretty much the same, but, Steve, I don't feel the same. The moment I saw them close the coffin over you, Steve, I knew then what I know now. That the part of me that was most alive and loving got buried down there with you.

So you see, Steve, you've just got to find some way to help us because despite what people say. I'm not strong and I honestly don't know what to do. I look, but I can't find answers, only questions. More and more questions demanding answers: Where did I go wrong with our daughter? Was I too strict? Or too
lenient? Did I love her too little... or did I love her too much?

Outside a truck door slams. I look at my watch. Five minutes after seven. Could he be here already? I rush to the window to see a while panel truck with black lettering —NEWTON CENTRE LOCKSMITHS— at my curb. And a young man, not all that much older than my seniors, is walking briskly up the front walk.

As he takes the fronts steps, two at a time, I already have the door open. "I really appreciate your being so prompt. You're even earlier than you said you'd be."

"It wasn't me you spoke to. It was my dad, but when he said that a Mrs. Brooks had to have her locks changed first thing in the morning so she wouldn't be late for school, well. I just knew it had to be you."

"Good Lord. I remember you!" I say, grabbing his hand, "You were a student of mine!"

He nods and smiles as he holds tightly to my hand. "You were my favorite English teacher." Then his eyes drop as though he is taking in the intricate patterns of the hall rug. "I guess you were my all-time favorite teacher!"

"Oh, that's lovely of you to say. David—your name is David?"

He grins as though I have given him a present. "David. yes. David Robinson. Hey, you know that's something! You must have had a few hundred students since me. I graduated Newton North two years ago.... How do you remember all of your students?"

I hear myself laughing. Laughter, it feels strange, but nice. Very nice. "You give me too much credit, you really do. I'm afraid I can't remember all my students. There have been so many in twenty years. But I think I can probably remember all the students that I really liked."

He takes in the compliment silently as I ask. "Your dad said it wouldn't take long putting in a new cylinder?"

"Ten minutes. Mrs. Brooks. Fifteen at the outside.... How many sets of keys will you need?"

"Sets of keys?" I feel my composure begin to dissolve. Suddenly I'm not sure I can trust my voice, so like an early grade-school child. I hold out a finger. Only one finger.

As I quickly turn to start up the stairs, the acrid smell of
My thoughts and reactions to what I am reading.

yesterday's fire once again strikes my nostrils. Never mind that now! This isn't the time for thinking about what was ... and especially not the time for thinking about what could have been.

Out even as I command myself to go nonstop into my bedroom for purse and checkbook and then quickly back down the stairs again. I see myself disobeying.

So I stand there at the threshold of Caren's room staring at the two things that had been burned by fire. Her canopy bed rests on only three legs and where the fourth leg once was there is a basketball-size burn in the thick lime-colored rug. Her stereo, records, wall-to-wall posters of rock stars, like everything else in this room, are layered with soot.

I remember now that one of the firemen remarked last night that it was sure a lucky thing that the fire had been contained before it reached the mattress. "You just don't know," he said, "how lucky you are."

How lucky I am? Am I lucky? That's what they used to call me back when I was a high school cheerleader. It all started when Big Joe Famon looked up from the huddle and didn't see me on the sidelines so he bellowed out. "Where's lucky Mandy?"

But if I really was lucky twenty-five years ago for Big Joe and the Maiden Eagles, then why can't I be just a little lucky for the ones I've really loved? 'Cause with a little luck, Steve's tumor could just have as easily been benign, but it wasn't. And with a little luck Caren could have gotten her highs from life instead of from drugs. But she didn't.

Luck. Dumb, unpredictable luck. Maybe there's no such thing as luck. Or maybe I used up all my precious supply on Big Joe Famon and the Maiden Eagles. Is that where I failed you, Caren? Not having any more luck to give you?

When you were a little thing, I knew exactly how to make your tears go away A. fresh diaper, a bottle of warm milk. or maybe a song or two while you slept in my arms. That was all the magic I owned, but in your eyes, all power rested in my hands. For you, my love, I lit the stars at night and every morning called forth the eastern sun.

Probably very early on, I should have warned you that your mother was a very ordinary woman with not a single
extraordinary power to her name. But, Honey, I don't think you would have believed me because I think you needed me to be a miracle mom every bit as much as I needed to be one.

The trouble, though, didn't start until you grew larger and your needs, too, grew in size. And the all-protecting arms that I once held out to you couldn't even begin to cover these new and larger dimensions. Because it wasn't wet diapers or empty stomachs that needed attending to. It was, instead, pride that was shaken and dreams that somehow got mislaid.

So I see now that what from the very beginning I was dedicated to doing, became, of course, impossible to do. And maybe, just maybe, somewhere in the most submerged recesses of our brains, way down there where light or reason rarely penetrates, neither of us could forgive my impotence.

"Mrs. Brooks." David calls from downstairs, "You're all set now."

"I'll be right down." And then without moving from the spot at the threshold, I speak softly to the empty room. Or, more to the point, to the girl who once lived and laughed and dreamed within these walls. –Caren, dear Caren, I don't know if you're in the next block or the next state. I don't know if I'll see you by nightfall or if I'll see you ever.

"But if you someday return to slip your key into a lock that it no longer fits, I hope you'll understand. Understand, at least, that I'm not barring you, but only what you have become."

“You should know too that if I actually possessed just a little of that magic that you once believed in. I wouldn't have a moment's trouble deciding how to spend it. I'd hold you to me until your crying stops and your need for drugs fades away."

David Robinson stands at the bottom of the hall stairs, waiting for me. "You know, you're a lucky lady. Mrs. Brooks,” he says, dropping a single brass key into my hand. "You're not even going to be late for class."

Although the center hall has always been the darkest room in the house, I fumble through my purse for my sunglasses before answering. “Yes, David." I say, peering at him through smoke-gray glasses, “People have always said that about me."
Responding to the Short Story (approximately 60 minutes)

Directions:
Answer the following six questions related to the story you just read. Read over all six questions before answering them. You may answer them in any order you wish. Answer each question as completely as possible.

1. What is your first reaction to this story? Write down any thoughts, opinions or questions you may have.

2. Caren, Mrs. Brooks' daughter, never actually appears in the story, but the author provides clues as to what she may be like. How do you think Caren feels about her mother? What makes you think so?

3. Describe the problems or conflicts the main character in this story is experiencing.

4. Choose one of the following quotations from the story. Explain what you think it means about the characters in the story as well as people in general. Circle the letter of the quotation you choose.
   A. "Probably very early on, I should have warned you that your mother was a very ordinary woman without a single extraordinary power to her name."
   B. "Understand, at least, that I am not barring you, but only what you have become."
   C. "You know, you're a lucky lady, Mrs. Brooks," he says, dropping a single brass key into my hand... "People have always said that about me."

5. What does the author say about human nature? Think about your world—the people you know and the experiences you've had. In what ways does this short story relate to your world and experiences? Explain why. If the story doesn't relate to your world, explain why it doesn't.

6. Should this story be considered "good literature"? Briefly make up your own definition of what makes a piece of literature "good," -and then explain how this story does or does not fit your definition.